

Date: May 18, 2016
To: Members of the House Education Committee
From: National Association of Social Workers – Michigan Chapter

NASW-Michigan is pleased to support HB 5618, HB 5619, and HB 5620 and its efforts to reduce suspensions and expulsions and promote meaningful alternatives for students to take responsibility for their actions, heal damaged relationships, and keep all children safe and engaged in learning.

The State of Michigan's school discipline code currently only details (and often mandates) exclusionary ways to handle school discipline. School districts too often feel they "must" suspend or expel, often with a disproportionate impact. In fact, Michigan is ranked third worst in the country for suspension rates for black students (Schott Foundation). HB 5618 and 5619 pave a new path and offer districts guidance and options, such as restorative practices.

We are also supportive of the provision eliminating suspensions and expulsions of students solely for being truant or chronically absent. NASW supports comprehensive and individualized services to enhance each student's opportunity to successfully complete school and to have the opportunities of a full and productive adult life. Students are truant for a wide variety of reasons, including mental health, chronic health, family crises, substance abuse, learning disabilities, transportation challenges, bullying and boredom at school — none of which are addressed by school exclusion.

Exclusion from school actually increases the risk of negative behaviors, such as crime and misuse of alcohol and other drugs. In fact, it can exacerbate truancy and school failure often leading to involvement with the criminal justice system. Expulsion and long-term suspension for truancy unnecessarily closes doors for students, who need additional support to complete school and become contributing members of society.

The proposals go a long way to fight the school-to-prison pipeline and getting Michigan in line with Federal guidelines. However, they could go further. We urge the Committee to incorporate the rest of the carefully vetted recommendations of the Michigan School Justice Partnership:

- remove mandatory expulsions for infractions other than a firearm possession;
- amend the mandatory expulsion requirement for firearm to expulsion no less than a year and allow superintendent to modify on a case by case basis;
- add requirements to look at exceptions for mandatory expulsions;
- and add additional reporting requirements for expulsions.¹

It is the position of NASW that disciplinary practices in elementary and secondary schools, including detention, suspension, and expulsion, must reflect the desire to shape students' behavior toward productive participation in schools and society. Many such policies are clearly punitive in intent and thus do not reflect the school's concern for retaining and successfully graduating students involved in their disciplinary system. The focus of school discipline should be to help students accept responsibility for their own behavior, rather than punishment. Therefore, we fully support the direction and passage of HB 5618, 5619, & 5620 and encourage the legislature to take the next step by introducing legislation that will address our additional recommendations to close the school-to-prison pipeline.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

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¹ (http://static.school2prison.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Zero-Tolerance-Packet-June-10_2014.pdf)